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State's grandparents most likely to live with grandchildren

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Hawai'i, colored by the cultural tradition of extended households and burdened by a high cost of living, leads the country with the greatest percentage of grandparents living with their grandchildren.

But the Census 2000 report released yesterday also said Hawai'i was among the states with the lowest percentage of grandparents who are the primary caregivers — an assertion disputed by local kinship-care advocates.

The U.S. Census Bureau yesterday released the report, describing nearly 6 million grandparents who lived with their grandchildren under age 18 in 2000, during the 12th Generations United International Conference in Alexandria, Va.

The 2000 census indicates that Hawai'i had 49,237 grandparents living in 32,182 households with their grandchildren. The percentage of all households was 8 percent — by far the highest in the nation. (No other state reached 6 percent.) While 3.6 percent of all people age 30 and over in the U.S. lived with their grandchildren, only 2 percent of whites did so, according to the report.

Considerably higher proportions were found among other racial and ethnic groups, including 6 percent of Asians and 10 percent of Pacific Islanders, the largest percentage of all groups. Hawai'i has a greater proportion of Asian and Pacific Islanders than any other state.

Gary Truitt and his wife, Dianne, lives in the same Palolo house with four generations: his wife's parents, his son, Edwin, and grandson, Dakota, on a part-time basis. The Truitts were living in an apartment when the in-laws, who are of Okinawan descent, suggested building a home and moving in together in 1990.

The arrangement not only made financial sense, he said, but created a loving environment and atmosphere of support for raising their two children. "It works for a lot of people," Truitt said. "In this area, a lot of families are putting on additions instead of buying new homes."

The census report found that of the grandparents living with their grandchildren in the U.S., more than 40 percent were the youngsters' primary caretakers. But in Hawai'i, only 28.5 percent of the grandparents living with their grandchildren were primary caregivers, the second lowest percentage in the nation.

"That's in error," said Jacqueline Chong, chairperson of Na Tutu, an advocacy coalition of grandparents and other relative caregivers.

Chong said the data she's seen indicates that Hawai'i is actually leading the nation in the proportion of grandparent caregivers.

Agreeing with Chong was Bernie Baker of the Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center. "Parents are dumping children onto grandparents because they don't want to take responsibility," she said.

As coordinator of the center's caretaker support groups in Waimanalo, Kailua and Kane'ohe, Baker is on the front lines of the issue, and she said she's seen the problem escalate along with the state's drug problem and high rate of incarceration. Chong said that if there truly is a low percentage of grandparent caregivers here, it's only due to the overall larger number of grandparents who live with children.

According to the report, Asians are less likely than other ethnic groups to be primary caregivers, and grandparents are probably less likely to be responsible for grandchildren if the grandchildren's parents are present.

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